Report into a post-qualifying learning and development framework and career pathway for social workers in Scotland

A report commissioned by Scottish Social Services Council to inform their development of a learning strategy for social workers

Contents

Remit

This report sets out recommendations in relation to post-qualifying social workers' learning and development. It was commissioned by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) to inform their consideration of a career long learning strategy for social workers.

Aims

- To enhance the core knowledge and skills of the social worker by understanding which dimensions of practice are necessary to enhance the initial learning from the degree.
- To work with the sector to develop the intelligence necessary to inform this.
- To consider how current policy will need enhanced social work practice and subsequent learning.
- To provide a methodology that allows the translation of the above intelligence to a proposal for day to day post-qualifying practice with relevant learning.
- To propose an application that is relevant to the exigencies of the SSSC registration and regulatory requirements.

The report is the result of a desk-based scoping review and has considered a wide range of evidence emanating from recently commissioned research projects, consultation exercises, conference events, research literature, face to face contacts and less formal/anecdotal sources. Simultaneously the social work degree is under review and the results of this will impact on the direction of post-qualifying social work professional development.

The assistance of respondents in the regulatory bodies, particularly in Scotland (SSSC) but also in Northern Ireland (NISCC) and Wales (CCW), and in the College of Social Work in England (TCSW), is gratefully acknowledged.

It is anticipated that the recommendations will now be subject to consultation across the relevant sector

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Executive summary of evidence

Post-qualifying learning and development for social workers is plentiful but lacks coherence and direction, and is not currently linked to a professional awards framework which might support a national career pathway.

Newly qualified social workers (NQSW) are demonstrating appropriate knowledge, skills and values in their first employment but are found lacking in certain aspects of professional competence particularly in relation to ongoing redefinition of the professional role.

NQSWs are experiencing variations in quantity and quality of support from employers and different levels of expectation in relation to their abilities.

The other UK countries have introduced formalised national arrangements for the first year(s) in practice, which are in various stages of development.

The social work profession is required to adjust to far-reaching changes in respect of organisational structures and professional relationships where role definition is contested and blurred.

Post-qualifying learning and development for social workers, as part of the continuum of learning, can enable social workers to re-invest in, and reclaim a professional identity and enhance professional leadership at practitioner, manager and strategic level.

Post-qualifying learning and development can generate new and specialist skills but can also consolidate core competencies throughout the career.

Motivation for ongoing learning and development comes from a variety of sources but includes facilitating career progression. Barriers are structural, organisational and financial. Effective learning, particularly in the workplace, requires a vibrant and positive learning culture.

Research knowledge and skills are visible and welcome in NQSWs but diminish as the career progresses. Research-mindedness, as a core competence, is not routinely nurtured, neither is research evidence routinely generated to inform service design and delivery.

A wide range of supporting frameworks, tools and learning scaffolding has been developed to assist professional development. These are powerful, highly regarded resources but lack calibration, create confusion and are employed randomly.

The other UK countries have introduced different models for career progression including credit accumulation and named awards. These are in various stages of development.

Executive list of recommendations

A formalised process of supervision, support and assessment against recognised professional requirements constituting a probationary period should become a requirement for all new graduates of the social work degree entering employment.

Full registration as a qualified social worker should commence on successful completion of this probationary period through meeting the requirements of the relevant award.

The requirements underpinning the probationary period should resonate with any adjustments to a core curriculum for the social work degree and provide the consolidating basis of a coherent a career long pathway for social work.

There is a need for robust intelligence about career patterns for social workers. Without this information and any sense of commonality across Scotland, it is difficult to envisage a career pathway. However, a professional awards framework can be more readily achieved as a preliminary step.

There is need for a systematic review of existing post-qualifying activity, the facilitators and barriers and the extent to which this activity impacts on career progression.

Beyond the probationary period and congruent to it, a national awards framework for social workers should be established to provide clarity around roles and responsibilities and to stimulate career progression by bringing national recognition across the existing variations in organisational and hierarchical arrangements.

Flexible pathways to gaining credit towards these awards should be established drawing on best practice in supporting workplace and blended learning, embedding work-based learning with a professional development framework. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) remains robust.

The role of the learning supervisor/manager should be formalised and recognised in line with career progression opportunities.

Consideration should be given to promoting and supporting a positive learning culture and a research culture with employers in order to mainstream research mindedness and expectations around post-qualifying learning.

Consideration should be given to establishing a national research strategy for social work built on partnerships between employers and higher education institutes (HEIs) with agreement about research priorities and building on the network of existing local collaborative arrangements.

Post registration training and learning (PRTL) requirements for social workers should be reviewed in relation to the frequency, quantity and quality of evidence required, particularly in relation to any new awards framework. Additionally, the funding mechanism should become more commensurate other contemporary professional memberships.

Introduction

Imagining the Future (Musselbrook, 2013) has provided us with a tantalising glimpse into how social services might look in 2025 by presenting a range of scenarios derived from a consideration of demographic change along with environmental, political and societal drivers. It predicts, broadly, a continuing shift on how social services are delivered and the impact this might have on the workforce. Its messages are pertinent in terms of how the current and future workforce prepares to meet ensuing challenges and achieves confidence, competence and sustainability.

Considerable drivers for change are already underway in Scotland in terms of preparing a future social services workforce. In relation to social workers (the focus of this report) the Review of the Social Work Degree is due to publish its findings imminently and is likely to outline how the current, by consensus robust, Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) can be updated and enhanced to better reflect contemporary practice demands (Dunwood and Gordon, 2014). A learning strategy for social services is in preparation. An ambitious Leadership Strategy for Social Services has been published and, as part of its implementation, accredited leadership learning pathways for Chief Social Work Officers and middle managers have been commissioned. These, along with existing Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) approved post-qualifying programmes in mental health and practice learning, could provide building blocks for what might become a career pathway for social workers. Sitting alongside these developments is a range of supporting frameworks or scaffolding tools viz the Continuous Learning Framework (CLF), and further guidance on how this aligns with the four Ps of the Changing Lives Leadership model; the Leadership Capabilities Framework; the Promoting Excellence Framework (based on the Standards of Care for Dementia in Scotland); the National Framework for Child Protection Learning and Development in Scotland, 2012. In the forerunner to this report (Gillies, 2014) it was pointed out that the sheer variety and lack of congruence across these developments might undermine their efficacy.

The report that follows below, therefore, does not emanate from a blank slate. The task of considering a career pathway and a learning strategy for social workers has been undertaken in the midst of a number of parallel and well-established developments which are likely to have an impact on, or at least influence, eventual outcomes irrespective of recommendations made below.

Purpose and preparation of report

This report sets out recommendations for a career long learning strategy for social workers where social workers may be required, or seek, to do additional

learning to support their best practice. In determining a possible framework for continuous learning for social workers, consideration has been given to:

- key areas of challenge for social workers
- implications for SSSC as regulator
- implications for employers.

The report draws on a range of commissioned research findings, formal reports, consultation exercises, research literature, and first-hand accounts forming a formidable mosaic of evidence which might inform this project. The robustness of the evidence, it should be noted, varies considerably from the peer reviewed to the anecdotal, but is utilised here to its best effect. The evidence available has been examined and analysed with the aim of identifying the relevant themes in relation to this project's aims, a task facilitated by the ordered nature of the majority of the evidence which was already thematically based. The research literature has been examined and utilised to support or contradict the themes as they emerged.

Section 1

Current post-qualifying learning and development for social workers in Scotland

If social work education is to be seen as a continuum throughout the career, it should be assumed that post-qualifying learning and development provides practitioners with the opportunity to maintain and raise professional standards, acquire new knowledge, hone new, sometimes, specialist skills and by demonstrating these achievements at the appropriate levels, progress through a clear and structured career pathway. Post-qualifying social work should be seen as more than compensating for any gaps in qualifying courses but rather become the means of developing a confident, competent, highly professional workforce.

As reported earlier (Gillies, 2014), the current post-qualifying learning and development of social workers in Scotland is typically employer-led resulting in a somewhat mesmerising array of in-house, largely unregulated, non-assessed provision sitting alongside bespoke courses commissioned for specific cohorts at each of the HEIs. There are obvious disadvantages to this, not least quality assurance, duplication of effort and cost and lack of transferability of credit. This is not to say that social workers are lacking a choice of post-qualifying learning and development rather that the provision lacks a common structure and a cohesive, well-defined learning pathway linked to recognition through career progression. Employers do not routinely agree on what might be mandatory, voluntary or even desirable learning and development in relation to their own idiosyncratic service delivery needs. SSSC's regulatory function specifies quantity but only broad brush guidance on the content of required continuous professional development for post registration training and learning (PRTL), while their approval of courses is limited to two specific areas, mental health and practice education.

Investing in professional development, it is anticipated, will aid recruitment and retention as social workers feel valued and supported in their professional development and equipped to deal with contemporary and complex practice. It will strengthen leadership capacity and build up effective management. It will provide public confidence by ensuring standards are being met. It will promote research minded practitioners whose practice will be more transparently evidence-led or informed. It will improve outcomes for service users and protect them through safe practices. It will also provide a benchmark for pay awards. These aspirations are ambitious but considered crucial in establishing and retaining a professional workforce fit for purpose.

Clarifying a career pathway for social workers, supported by a career long learning strategy, will bring Scotland in line with the other UK countries. While each has adopted a particular approach and while each of these models (or frameworks) is still under various stages of development and review, the commitment to establishing clear expectations is similarly predicated on these anticipated benefits. The UK position will be examined in due course.

The newly qualified social worker

While the results of the Review of the Social Work Degree are finalised, it is a logical first step to consider the early stage social worker and the implications of what is known about their experiences in relation to establishing the foundations of a career pathway.

In Scotland, the extent to which the newly qualified social worker (NQSW) is ready for frontline practice has been examined in two parallel and complementary studies (Welch, 2014; Grant et al, 2014) and further explored in an open survey of the profession (SSSC, 2014a) and consultation with 31 of Scotland's 32 local authorities (MacDonald, 2014). These various sources reveal significant areas of agreement and some contradictory findings which support emerging concerns about the newly qualified workforce being under-prepared for some (but by no means all) of the complexities of contemporary practice (Brannan, 2014a,b, Grant et al, 2014, MacDonald, 2014).

Simultaneously the Review of the Social Work Degree in Scotland is due to publish its report in 2015 and is likely to confirm the robustness of the degree in terms of delivering the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) while making recommendations on how these standards can be enhanced to better reflect changes in expectations for social work services as policy and population change impact on the professional role. Initiatives like self-directed support, integrated services, co-production, community development and integrated teamwork have each influenced the professional role and function of a social worker, where their unique contribution has become somewhat obscured and their relationship with service users redefined.

Although the current SiSWE are national, it is acknowledged that the degree in Scotland has various expressions of these standards and graduates therefore reach the profession with variations in theoretical knowledge and applied experience. While this can be seen as a positive for a profession seeking imaginative and creative approaches to problem-solving, it has implications for a standardised approach to post-qualifying learning and development. The extent to which the necessary adaptations to how social work is designed and delivered can only be addressed through collaborative means involving employers, educators and those who use social work services.

Currently the experience of an NQSW in Scotland is, at best, serendipitous and depends largely on the place of employment and the nature of the workplace learning environment offered. It is clear from many sources that NQSW experience a range of supports during their early practice years and the impact of these experiences can be significant for their career trajectory. McFadden (2013) in an Irish study states, 'managers should be invested in as a group of professionals in light of the "critical" role they play in nurturing the early career of social workers, which impacts on subsequent resilience' (p19). Similarly, MacRae (2010) cites Bates et al who suggest that induction and probation periods of NQSWs need much greater investment, perhaps in the form of specific training for line managers and in the design of a structured induction package (p16). One source has distinguished between 'professional supervision' and line management as being key to the first phase of practice (Brannan, 2014b). 'Although we can be seen to expect a lot we also have a role to play in softening the transition from student to worker' (ibid).

The Welch/Grant et al studies illustrate that while the NQSW respondents felt, overall, adequately prepared, their line managers were able to identify specific areas of deficit linked to lack of confidence in some aspects of relationship building, dealing with complexity and certain operational skills, such as report writing and resource management. These 'areas for development' echo perceived lack of preparedness raised by other informants (Brannan, 2014a; Gillies and MacCowan, 2015). For example, 'We felt that academia looks for different things in students than we look for in staff. One of the issues with the honours degree is that solid relational practitioners may not be able to meet academic expectations' (Brannan, 2014a).

It is worth considering the extent to which employer expectations of the NQSW are realistic and fair (Brannan, 2014a,b, Social Work Academics Group, 2014, Gillies and MacCowan, 2015,). Other comparable professions (teaching, medicine, law) have highly structured probationary periods and clear thresholds for moving beyond initial training (Thompson, 2014). A GP, for example, will have had several years post-qualifying training before becoming a registered GP. The extent to which employers are seeking fully functioning professionals in their newly qualified staff seems to vary across the range of respondents. The range of 'areas for development' implies a gap between expectation and delivery, while other respondents acknowledge unrealistic expectations, viz 'Other areas to look at would be the kind of work given to NQSW – we were aware of examples where the manager's expectations were probably too high' and 'We don't expect people to fully hit the ground running. We recognise that coming into post can be a de-skilling experience and that time to settle in is necessary'. (Brannan, 2014b). Baginsky (2013) reminds us that we expect NQSW to be fully reflective practitioners in the absence of supportive practice wisdom around them when their teams comprise of those with little more experience than them. Oliver

(2013) reinforces this stating they 'must negotiate what it means to be a social worker without social workers close by to help' (p774).

The UK position

As the forerunner to this report set out (Gillies, 2014) there are parallel developments taking place across the UK and at various stages of gestation.

In England an Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) was introduced in 2012. This currently voluntary process has now 'helped almost 1900 newly qualified social workers to develop their skills, improve their knowledge and strengthen their professional confidence, through access to regular support and ongoing assessment by their employer', Chief Social Worker (Adults). An evaluation of ASYE during its implementation phase was conducted by Host Policy Research (2014) on behalf of Skills for Care. Their report contains a number of useful case studies illustrating their main findings. Emerging issues are listed below with additional commentary, where relevant, as the issues pertain to the situation in Scotland.

- Awareness raising/promotion of scheme – found to somewhat patchy given its newness and that it was replacing an existing established scheme, but the need for better communication sought.
- The need for closer collaboration between participating bodies, particularly if NQSW and assessors work across authorities.
- Clarity around signposting to operational guidance, documentation, proforma and learning resources – investment in getting these right seems beneficial and avoids confusion.
- Caseload protection (in Scotland over a third of NQSW surveyed reported their case load was not protected: Grant et al, 2014).
- Quality and quantity of supervision (in Scotland almost all the NQSW surveyed who received good supervision, reported that they benefitted greatly from it, particularly when it went beyond the day to day case management. However there were inconsistencies in the frequency and quality of both supervision and induction).
- Employer support for supervisors/assessors including addressing their training needs (in Scotland there were indications that line managers were not sufficiently prepared in knowledge and understanding of the PRTL requirements of NQSW).
- Both NQSW and their supervisors/assessors were able to identify areas of professional development through their participation in the ASYE (the Scottish studies similarly report perceived benefits from well-supported NQSW programmes of support).
- NQSW cited as benefits: time for reflection; peer support; structured support and guidance, aids transition from education to practice; workload

protection; aids future employment (in Scotland, the majority of NQSW surveyed valued the process of continuing professional development to help fill knowledge and skills gaps).

The authors stress that any newly established system is likely to encounter embedding issues. Skills for Care have now launched (2014) a longitudinal study, designed to cover three years, which will track and measure the impact of ASYE and benefits for both employers (n=24 authorities in England) and employees and will publish findings on an annual basis.

Irrespective of the pending results of the above study, the ASYE in England is about to be formalised in that the Chief Social Worker (Adults) has recently announced her recommendation for 'the creation of a standardised assessment process for social workers with adults, with national criteria to apply to all social workers at the end of their first year in practice, with continued employment dependent on successful completion'. The evidence underpinning these national criteria are set out in accompanying Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) which define what a social worker in adult care and in children and families should know and be able to do at the end of their first year in employment. It is anticipated this new formalised process will improve quality and consistency in practice, improve standards of education and training by dint of better quality assurance including application of the Professional Capabilities Framework (albeit a review of this framework has just been announced).

External endorsement will be ensured through a National Framework for the Assessment of Social Workers at the End of their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment England comprising standardised arrangements for assessment and moderation led by Skills for Care, alongside a national validations system for these arrangements led by the College of Social Work. The framework prescribes a series of specifics such as the form the assessment should take (ie number of direct observations, nature and number of written pieces to be undertaken, number and range of samples of case notes and reports to be submitted, examples of suitable feedback from peers, managers and service users, how the assessment process will be carried out and endorsed). The College of Social Work has responded positively to these recommendations: 'We welcome the proposal for a national quality assurance system for ASYE. The College has previously expressed concern that we are tasked with issuing certificates to social workers who successfully complete their ASYE, without being able to assure the quality of the employer assessment and support. The proposed scheme will provide the assurance that those being confirmed in their membership of the profession at the end of their first year in practice have met the required professional standards. It is important that the whole profession has confidence in the scheme. TCSW looks forward to developing the scheme' (Dec 2014).

In Northern Ireland the Assessed Year in Practice was introduced in 2006 and embodies both a system of supports and an assessment framework based on six key professional roles/National Occupational Standards (NOS). 'The AYE is to ensure that AYE registrants have made the transition from student to employee and have demonstrated sustained, continuous, effective competence in the workplace' (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2014). It is the responsibility of the NQSW to find suitable employment which offers the required scope of experience. There are clear expectations set out around what constitutes a suitable/acceptable post, acknowledging the growing issue of part-time and temporary posts and those working in non-traditional social work settings. Supervision is only permitted from a qualified social worker. The year-long process is prescribed in terms of employer and employee expectation. A minimum of 10 days training and learning is required, samples of work, like assessment reports must be submitted although observation of practice is not deemed necessary. There is a mid-point appraisal requiring a written reflective account from the NQSW and again at the final appraisal. They are currently developing their post-qualifying framework into a CPD framework, Professional in Practice, which will give credit for CPD as well as professional awards but is not yet linked to career progression.

In Wales, the Continuing Professional Education and Learning (CPEL) framework enables professional progression through four professional awards, providing a means for practitioners to progress without following a managerial route. For the NQSW it supports progression from initial professional qualification through a consolidation programme designed to embed and extend professional practice in areas of increasing complexity. Funding for this programme is different from the other three in the framework where funded places are allocated to employers. In the consolidation programme employers draw on the social care workforce development grant to run it. Typically the NQSW will initially undergo a period of induction then complete the consolidation programme in their second year of employment. Following recent consultation it is likely to become mandatory and followed by the other awards. These awards underpin a career pathway (see later in the report).

Section 2

The case for a probationary period

Universal support has emerged from across the evidence (and beyond, eg Social Work Services Strategic Forum, Social Work Academics Group and outlined by Croisdale-Appleby, 2014:68) for a more robust, systematic and nationwide approach to supporting NQSWs as they embark on their first period of professional practice. This is arguably a logical response given the ad hoc nature of current experiences where there appears to be wide variation in levels and quality of supervision, employer expectation and concessions such as limited caseloads.

The Social Work Services Strategic Forum in their recent consultation report Social Services in Scotland; A Shared Vison and Strategy (Oct 2014) state that 'Newly qualified social workers would potentially benefit from a more structured system of support in their first year of practice similar to other professions. Local authorities which have this in place can demonstrate the value of this support which not only impacts on effective practice but also aids retention' (p16). To this end they propose to 'consider the development and resourcing of a structured framework of support for newly qualified social workers' (ibid).

While the principle of a supported period in first employment has overwhelming support, there is less clarity about what it should look like. An emerging theme from the range of contribution is that of more imaginative use of a probationary period. Ideas expressed include rotation of experience around specialities and localities, better use of a buddy system and mentoring (see professional supervision above) and considerable support for shadowing more experienced colleagues.

MacRae (2010:6) sets out a detailed examination of a coaching approach for NQSW and states 'Coaching can be distinguished from mentoring because it emphasises training. The learner needs to learn something specific such as job knowledge or a new skill. The coach indicates what they want the learner to do, suggest how it may be done, follows up and corrects errors. The objective is to teach and guide the learner in the performance of their immediate task or assignment.'

Additionally, respondents suggest that assessment should be continuous, with more frequent and regular feedback whether formative or part of the assessment process, providing a cumulative opportunity for reflection and development. This is in contrast to the current system of PRTL which is typically completed retrospectively with resulting diminished opportunity to apply learning to practice as it occurs. There are suggestions about the length of any such

period – one year or two – and whether statutory settings are a necessity irrespective of nature of employer. Respondents highlighted the benefits of mentoring NQSW and the ongoing professional development opportunity for formalising supervision of the probationary period.

Summary of evidence related to a probationary period for NQSW

While the current social work degree appears robust in terms of meeting its current standards, there are identified gaps in what employers are seeking and the knowledge and skills brought by NQSW to the workplace. Some of these gaps are attributed to policy imperatives arising from welfare reform, public service reform, austerity impositions, changes in organisational structures, integrated services and demographic pressure (see for example, White, 2014) all of which impact on how services are designed and delivered. Other perceived gaps relate to core operational skills like report writing, forming effective relationships and managing resources. The Review of the Social Work degree will address these issues and, in so doing, is likely to make recommendations which will impact on post-qualifying learning for social workers.

There is universal support across the range of evidence for a formalised probationary period for NQSW although with some concerns expressed about how this might be assessed and how existing resources and organisational structures will support this. There are interesting ideas suggested about the content and nature of what a probationary period might be, how long it should last and what scaffolding could be put in place to steer the NQSW through the experience. The situation in the rest of the UK offers guidance on what has worked in other countries and what pitfalls might be avoided.

Recommendations related to a probationary period for NQSW

A formalised process of supervision, support and assessment against recognised professional requirements constituting a probationary period should become a requirement for all new graduates of the social work degree entering employment.

Full registration as a qualified social worker should commence on successful completion of this probationary period through meeting the requirements and achievement of the relevant award.

The requirements underpinning the probationary period should resonate with any adjustments to a core curriculum for the social work degree and provide the consolidating basis of a coherent a career long pathway for social work

The role of the probationer's supervisor/manager should be formalised and recognised in line with career progression opportunities.

Possible implications arising from these recommendations

Creation of a set of standards underpinning the probationary period and a core curriculum should be agreed through a partnership of employers, academics and the SSSC.

Consideration will be required about any role of the SSSC in the approval, monitoring and reviewing of any approved courses leading to, or underpinning, the agreed standard for successful completion of a probationary period.

The requirements for a probationary period should integrate seamlessly with any emerging changes to the social work degree.

This will form the initial stage of any career pathway so will entail careful planning to ensure coherence across stages.

Consideration needs to be given to how best to integrate existing frameworks particularly in terms of identifying learning needs and supporting career progression.

A national assessment framework supporting the standard should be approved and regularly reviewed by the SSSC ensuring that certification is meaningful and a robust indicator of suitability and readiness for entry to the qualified workforce.

SSSC may adopt a role in encouraging and supporting an effective learning culture across the sector.

Resources will be required to prepare and support adequate numbers of supervisory staff and those involved in the holistic assessment of the NQSW's practice against recognised, agreed and embedded standards and levels. (In England participating employers currently receive £2000 per NQSW and in Wales employers draw on the Social Care Workforce Development Grant to run their consolidation programme).

Tensions are likely to emerge around what are acceptable levels of supervision and it is helpful to have these expectations/requirements clearly prescribed.

Consideration needs to be given to the preparedness, willingness and capacity of supervisors from the wider workforce. What will be the expectations in terms of their preparation, support, knowledge and understanding and capacity?

There may be concerns about diverting this body of experienced supervisors from what might be their current role in practice learning, limiting such opportunities for students.

Supervision by a non-social worker is increasingly likely in emerging integrated teams. This has resonance for the professional supervision outlined above as distinct from line management.

Consideration needs to be given to existing employer HR structures and the extent to which they can support a probationary period.

Consideration needs to be given to the status of probationer social workers in respect of income levels, conditions of employment, job security etc. Concern has been expressed about potential exploitation of underpaid, inexperienced workers. The issue of continuous service is also relevant, as is any gap between achieving the social work degree and starting employment.

Similarly, a new status of probationer social worker may have implications for the current register.

Consideration of those failing to meet required standards will be necessary. Respondents have talked about the probationary period as a good 'weeding out' process. Consideration needs to be given to remedial processes and/or an exit strategy for those holding the social work degree but considered unsuitable for full registration.

There are a number of concerns around the assessment process, particularly if the workplace supervisor is not a social worker (see above) and if the final assessment decision rests solely with the employer. There is considerable support for a panel assessment process comprising external representatives, employer and possible HEI.

Continuity may become an issue for those changing employer during the probationary period.

Section 3

A career pathway for social workers supported by a learning strategy

The characteristics of successful career-based learning are becoming better recognised in spite of a dearth of information. We know something of the motivations and barriers and these are considered below along with a number of related issues which might contribute to an understanding of the challenges facing practitioners and employers. As outlined above, the majority of post-qualifying learning takes place when the learner is in post and largely in tandem with maintaining that professional role. The significance, therefore, of workplace support is obvious, as is a consideration of providing accessible and manageable steps to learning through flexible routes and timescales. Current interest in online open badges, designed to maintain the learner's motivation and interest, is an example of seeking new technologically assisted approaches to flexible learning and where innovation and cost effectiveness are significant considerations and where location based or situated learning can be supported.

This is not to underestimate the personal commitment required to undertake any kind of developmental programme while holding down a demanding job (eg Kainth, 2014). Work-based learning has many advantages as will be addressed below, but should not obscure the benefits of a blended process with adequate, employer-supported time out for reflection and writing. This coupled with peer-learner support and embracing the student identity provided by a regular campus experience can go some way to dissipate the isolation of online learners.

Motivation

Social workers, it seems, draw their motivation for continuing their professional learning and development from a number of sources. For some it is mandatory, a requirement of their post (eg Kainth, 2014; Brannan, 2014). Others cite seeing an opportunity to pursue an area of specific interest where they can hone specialist skills and, for some, take on the role of expert in their team (Gillies and MacCowan, 2015; Brady, 2014, Brannan, 2014b). To some extent this is linked to a reinvigorating process, reigniting and maintaining enthusiasm while developing professionally.

Brady's (2014) respondents, in a small Irish study of child protection social workers, reported being motivated if they could see a relevance to their current post and a clear linkage to career development. Brannan's respondents cited examples where social workers should be prepared prior to promotion rather than once in a promoted post.

Webb and Carpenter (2012, cited in Baginsky 2013) found that what they termed organisational factors such as quality supervision, career progression and professional autonomy, along with administrative factors concerning salary, workloads and clarity around role definition were the most successful at reducing staff turnover and improving retention of experienced staff. Here there are echoes of the kind of factors which seem to motivate social workers to pursue further learning and development, ie the potential for increased professional confidence, career progression and financial reward. The Ideas Platform (SSSC, 2014a) yielded a suggestion for the introduction of secondments across employers, with the benefit of exchanging experiences and, one might suppose, a reinvigoration derived from this exposure, also referred to as 'intellectual refreshment' (Brady, 2014).

Resource considerations

It seems clear that opportunities for post-qualifying learning have become less plentiful over recent years, in line with global budgetary concerns across the sector. Competition for allocated courses is fiercer, particularly at more senior levels of staff where there is less scope for absorbing the absence of a colleague (eg Gillies and MacCowan, 2015; Kainth, 2014). This is particularly significant for middle managers who find themselves in the pivotal role of 'reconciling increasingly complex demands from service users, carers and staff while coping with reduced funding and managing the frontline' (Farrow, 2014:813). Self-funding of courses is not unknown but, arguably, has been less widely embraced than in other professions like medicine – albeit there may be complex economic reasons for this in terms of where medicine traditionally draws its members and differences in pay scales. This also applies to a willingness to study in one's own time, at weekends and evenings – a practice more readily adopted in the health professions (Patel; personal correspondence).

Factors which undermined participation in Brady's study included time constraints, difficulties of addressing unfinished work, prioritising study over work demands and the possibility of self-funding. While Kainth's report for Glasgow City Council was essentially an attempt to explain the large number of experienced practice teachers not supporting a student, his report confirms that workload and time constraints, along with variations in employer support and supervision were key factors. Financial incentives were thought important as recognition of the extra work involved in supporting a student.

Recognition and reward

Brady's respondents linked CPD to, among other things, career progression, and recognition of their professional development rewarded by promotion, if this was an ambition and it seems logical to argue for professional development to be

linked to both higher status and ensuing financial reward (Dominelli, 2014, Lombard, 2011).

However, there are several references across the evidence to support career progression which avoids a shift into management (eg Baginsky, 2013, Brannan, 2014b, Gillies and MacCowan, 2015). Ideas for recognition from the evidence available included consideration of a chartered status, or practice champions – particularly recognition from a body outwith the employer and recognised across the profession. Some post-qualifying learning will be directly related to a move to a specialist post. For some, professional development is a personal goal, a means of gaining more job satisfaction through more effective practice and greater responsibility (eg Gillies and MacCowan, 2015). Dominelli (2014) states that 'Qualifications need to be clearly linked to career structures that nurture professionals throughout their careers, provide logical progression and tie education to occupational position, status and pay'.

Leadership

It is not the intention here to rehearse the very significant developments around leadership currently underway to support the whole workforce. One leadership outcome states 'Social service leaders, managers and workers understand and are confident in their leadership capabilities and responsibilities and exercise them effectively in their everyday work' (SSSC 2014).

There are strong imperatives for leadership capabilities to be nurtured and, arguably, as services become increasingly integrated across professions, the leadership characteristics of social workers are required at practice, organisational and strategic levels within the organisational structure. Oliver (2013) highlights the important role of inter-professional leadership and the need to 'exercise a kind of non-hierarchical, facilitative leadership for which highly developed communication and interpersonal skills are required' (p778). Practitioners reported the leadership role expected of, or foisted upon, the social worker by other professionals in part due to a misunderstanding of statutory responsibilities (Gillies and MacCowan, 2015).

Reasserting professionalism, professional identity and integrated services

Arguably professional confidence is both external and internal. A confident profession is one where it can operate successfully alongside other professions, transcending traditional boundaries with discrete knowledge, skills and values, and which can provide effective and complementary supports to those requiring services.

Professionalism is thought to derive from a series of characteristics including professional identity, professional status and degree of autonomy and discretion (Hudson, 2002). Social work can rightly claim its place among the professions requiring as it does a set of specialist knowledge and unique skills; a registered, regulated workforce; compulsory continuous professional development; membership of a professional body to which fees are paid. In relation to the latter social workers pay, in contrast to other professions, a very modest fee to the regulatory body in order to remain on the professional register and, arguably, in the absence of a strong professional body which could attract a more meaningful fee structure and with transparent benefits for its membership, not least in defending and promoting the profession. This is a two way process, of course, when it demands standards of behaviour such as, 'Professionalism means behaving in a way that does not bring your profession into disrepute, managing personal and professional boundaries and keeping your professional development up to date,' (Malik cited Lombard, 2011, SSSC, 2010).

Unsurprisingly perhaps other professions consider it still under development 'cobbled together from a wide variety of interventions, programs (sic), and functions' (cited in Oliver, 2013:775) and that [other disciplines] appear more certain about what constitutes knowledge within their profession (Webber, 2013:945). Dominelli believes 'social workers aren't valued, are too easily blamed and not used or paid enough. This would be unheard of in other professions that are seen as skilled'.

Some would argue that while social work is now highly regulated, the degree of autonomy is increasingly threatened in contemporary social work practice with blurred role boundaries in integrated teams, organisational structures devoid of a social work title or label, greater service user autonomy and systems which rely more on process than creativity and individual responses. McLaughlin, however questions the validity of claims 'for occupational boundaries and […] the legitimate control of a particular area of practice' and wonders if these constitute anything more than a seeking public acceptance (2013:958). Put simply, he sees a need for the confidence to provide a mono-professional solution when this is more appropriate than a default multi-professional response.

There are particular challenges for a profession like social work which is underpinned by a strong values base of promoting and defending social justice, routinely eroded by managerialist processes predicated on performance criteria and rationing of services. Dewe et al (2006:1) question whether social workers have in fact become 'executors of sanctions instead of experts of empowerment'. Oliver (2013) reinforces this dilemma asking if social workers are clinicians or community activists, experts or equals, while Musselbrook (2013) wonders about

a shift from fixers or co-facilitators. It is also a profession delivering universal services but delivered, largely, by individuals. 'Frontline staff need to have delegated authority. They also need a sense of personal authority and the confidence to take measured risk' (University of Stirling 2010:24).

A strong professional identity should enable effective collaboration across teams with confidence in the unique contribution from each member. Professional identity can also be measured in terms of loyalty to a professional group particularly when status issues are involved. This is particularly apt for a profession dispersed across a maze of service delivery patterns. Oliver, citing Bartel, states that solid professional identity can 'unite us as social workers, increase our reciprocity, collaboration and work effort' (2013:781).

In her argument in favour of social workers as 'boundary spanners' Oliver outlines a role identifier which can underscore social workers' professionalism. Boundary spanners, traditionally working on the margins and mediating with the wider environment, have now come to represent, in her view, those whose role is to 'work between systems whose goals, though superficially complementary, may carry inherent conflicts requiring mediation, negotiation, and strategy' (2013:779). These very skills, she argues, central to the arsenal of good social work practice, carve out a crucial role for social workers in the context of integrated teams. Through exercising these, perhaps we can also achieve and maintain equal status with our various partners (Musselbrook, 2013).

Research mindedness

An evidence-informed or evidence-led workforce relies on robust evidence and needs to know where and how to access relevant data, how to generate it, how to make sense of it and how to apply the messages from research to enhance practice. Dewe et al (2006:1) question whether evidence based decisions actually mask the complexity of contemporary social work and, more challengingly, whether there is sufficient proof that it actually improves outcomes for service users. Their message is one of caution, therefore, that reliance on an evidence base is a panacea for making sense of 'uncertain and unpredictable contexts', a terrain Schon described as the 'confusing, messy swampy lowland' of practice (cited in Bates et al, 2010:42). However, these concerns apart, an emerging evidence base for the efficacy of social work practices has to be seen as a means of improving outcomes.

The available evidence (Grant et al, 2014) confirms that a significant majority (64%) of the emerging workforce leave university with a high degree of research mindedness and ability to recognise its benefits. NQSW are seen to be on the vanguard of up to the minute research (Welch, 2014) and therefore able to

provide a useful resource to the more experienced team members. Welch differentiates between theory and knowledge, or what might be termed the practice wisdom of more experienced social workers for whom research has less immediate applicability. It appears that use of research tails off as the social worker's career extends and Brady's respondents wondered about greater support from universities in guiding practitioners to write about good practice (Brady, 2014a, Gillies and MacCowan, 2015).

The consultation document on a shared Vison and Strategy for Scotland's Social Services (2014:20/1) identifies and provides examples of 'clear strengths in the development of research, knowledge mobilisation and evidence-informed practice'. The document also identifies 'a need to develop a cyclical, relational process of research and implementation to break down the traditional barriers between key stakeholders and ensure maximum involvement and participation' and further outlines a range of ambitions which could amount to a comprehensive research strategy for social workers encompassing how research priorities can be identified and agreed, how research can be funded and disseminated and how its use can be promoted across the sector (p21). This endorsement adds weight to the argument in support of a profession comfortable with the research process. Scotland is fortunate in having the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) whose remit is to stimulate the profession's use of research for service improvement but its outgoing Director is candid about the size of the culture change needed for the profession to fully prepare for the challenges of integrated services through 'innovation and lateral thinking' (The Herald, 6 Feb 2015: 22).

Several suggestions have been made about how research mindedness can be enhanced. These include promoting the role for academics within practice settings; funding and supporting higher degree and PhD studentships for practitioner-researchers; recognising good practice through supporting practitioners to publish; employers welcoming research requests from HEIs and individual students; routine dissemination of students' dissertation findings; equity in collaborative partnerships between employers and HEIs. A foundation of highly productive, localised partnerships exists which reflects a resource which could and should be harnessed.

Importance of a positive learning culture in sustaining a learning pathway

One of the proposed actions in the Vision document is to 'engage with current social services leadership activities to promote research and evidence-informed policy and practice across key organisations: this is essential to ensure the organisational and cultural change for research, knowledge mobilisation and evidence-informed practice is embedded in organisations' (p21).

An effective learning strategy is reliant on employees benefitting from a positive learning culture. Thompson (2013) distinguishes between a learning culture, where learning is 'supported, encouraged and expected', a non-learning culture where colleagues focus, with diminished success, on the job at the expense of learning and the anti-learning culture where learning is actively discouraged 'as if learning presents some sort of threat and shouldn't be countenanced' (p30). Lombard (2011) argues that practitioners need time and space to reflect on their practice as an implicit requirement of their professionalism. The evidence across Scotland implies a wide variation in how learning and development is encouraged and supported by employers.

SSSC's current approach to workforce learning and development emphasises the importance of employers promoting and actively supporting learning, in that learning in the workplace can enhance context-specific learning. The context of the social worker's learning appears to be highly significant. Brady suggests that social workers must be aware of and understand the context of their practice in the face of continuously changing demands (2014), an imperative Domakin also refers to as 'context applied knowledge' (2014:720). In relation to integrated service, sharing a physical space can engender greater recognition of others' roles, functions and working practices that can be a short-cut to more formalised multi-disciplinary learning. However, the workplace should be seen as more than its physical space. It can be an opportunity for developing 'shared meanings, ideas, behaviours, attitudes that determine the working environment and relationships' (Kitto et al 2014:183). 'The learning potential of work is widely acknowledged in existing studies showing that the shared nature of the work context and the way work is organised creates opportunities for professionals to meet as work unfolds' (Gregory et al 2014:200).

Learning in the workplace, particularly as part of a career long pathway, allows for both formal and informal learning. Baginsky (2013, citing Fenton-O'Creeby et al) points out that 'novice practitioners gain their expertise through engagement with peers and mentors in a community of practice' (p5). In relation to informal learning, we have ample evidence of the benefits of shadowing, peer support, mentoring, networking and coaching (eg MacCrae 2010) all which usefully sit alongside and often enhance more formal learning experiences. Ironically, in the light of a dearth of evidence to confirm this, informal learning might be as effective as formal learning but at a fraction of the financial investment. Kitto suggests informal learning can include reflection on experience, working on a quality improvement project [...] or self-directed efforts to enhance one's knowledge or skills, ie earning often occurs apart from an educational activity.

Learning in the workplace goes beyond the physical setting but 'should be understood to include shared meanings, ideas, behaviours and attitudes that determine the working environment and relationships' (Kitto et al 2014:183).

They further cite Matthews (1999) who suggests an effective learning culture 'requires the sustained development of both the individual and the organisation' (ibid). MacRae (2010) cites Cooper and Rixon (2001) who 'found that supporting and sustaining a positive workplace learning environment requires the active involvement of colleagues, managers and supervisors. Importantly, there is a need for underpinning practical arrangements that enable workplace study, learning and reflection' (P15).

The UK position

England

The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) for social workers sets out the distinct and key capabilities expected of a social worker at every level of her/his career, capabilities which go beyond the threshold standards set by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). The framework comprises nine levels from entry student to strategic level based on the social worker's demonstrable ability to cope with complexity, risk and responsibility across a range of settings. Across each of the levels, nine domains describe the knowledge, skills and values underpinning effective practice. In this respect the PCF is based around a series of capabilities rather than specific awards. A review of PCF has now been announced.

As stated earlier Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) set out expectations for NQSW and these have been supplemented by a proposed model for a CPD framework and supporting curriculum guidance, initially looking at the skills and knowledge required for social work with people with autism and the Mental Capacity Act, due for publication in April 2015. Further development is underway of a range of tools and resources which will deliver wider improvements in social work practice, including support for mental health social workers and employers, guidance for supporting those with dementia and their carers and to support implementation of the Care Act.

Ireland

Professional in Practice (PiP) is a credit accumulation process that allows the successful completion of learning and development against professional standards and competence. It does so by means of the candidate accumulating professional credits on a formula of two credits per hour of learning activity, plus extra credits for evidence of reflection and impact, (based on a system used by the Royal College of General Practitioners). A minimum of 100 credits is required to claim that any requirement towards a professional award has been met. The system for claiming credits is online and based on self-assessment backed by supervisor/manager verification.

There are three levels of professional award in the professional awards framework:

- consolidation (comprising three core and six post-qualifying requirements)
- specialist (comprising nine post-qualifying requirements)
- leadership and strategic (comprising nine post-qualifying requirements).

A candidate can accumulate credits through three principal means:

- accredited structured learning, ie assessed programmes such as diplomas and certificates leading to awards
- non-accredited learning, eg usually in-house, non-assessed
- research, ie using research to provide evidence for practice, or carrying out evaluation or audits.

As yet the PiP awards framework is not linked to a career progression pathway although there was early development work by the Health and Social Care Board in Northern Ireland to develop this. In due course it is hoped PiP could be aligned to such a pathway.

Wales

The Continuing Professional Education and Learning (CPEL) Framework sets out four levels of credit-based programme which are largely work-based:

- consolidation for NQSW
- experienced practitioner
- senior practitioner
- consultant social worker.

The programmes define clear national role profiles for each level and contribute to creating new posts which will facilitate career progression by setting out eligibility criteria.

The consolidation programme will become compulsory for new social work graduates from 2015 (subject to consultation). This programme is commissioned by employers working with a HEI/s and approved by the Care Council for Wales (CCW).

CCW has contracted with University of Cardiff as the awarding body to co-ordinate nationally approved programmes for experienced practitioners, senior practitioners and consultants, through an alliance with three other universities (Bangor, Swansea and Glyndwr) ensuring geographical spread, as well as wider

access through flexible and innovative delivery methods. Currently the programmes up and running are the consolidation programme for NQSW, the experienced practitioner and the senior practitioner programme. The consultant programme is under development with its first intake planned for October 2015. The funding scheme allows for 100 places across the three programmes which are allocated to employers who can also purchase additional places or modules at preferential rates. The uptake during the first year has been good.

The delivery of the experienced practitioner and senior practitioner programmes for the first cohort of social workers will be in 2014, and the consultant social worker programme in 2015. Thereafter the programmes will be delivered annually. The CCW has been consulting on making the CPEL programme mandatory in due course starting with the consolidation programme.

The programmes are designed to support social workers to develop excellent practice whatever their role and will help prepare social workers to deliver the Welsh Government vision for citizen centred services.

The CPEL Framework serves the important function of underpinning the new National Career Pathway for social workers. The pathway sets out four stages:

- newly qualified social worker (NQSW) (years 1 and 2)
- social worker (year 3+)
- senior social work practitioner (three years post-qualified)
- consultant social worker (five years post-qualified).

This means a social worker can now progress professionally while maintaining a practice role without having to follow a managerial route. Assessment criteria will address performance in post.

To support the implementation of the National Career Pathway, role profiles have been attributed to each stage which set out clear roles and responsibilities for, and define the differences between, the different levels of social worker. The roles comprise both responsibilities and capabilities required for each level and as such can be used by employers to develop job descriptions The CPEL is one of the ways in which the career pathway is implemented – by providing the training and learning for the roles in the career pathway.

The Welsh Local Government Association agreed the career pathway in January 2013 and all local authorities are encouraged to use the role profiles in introducing the career pathway in their area.

However, implementation of the career pathway has been very patchy. An evaluation framework to measure impact on practice has been commissioned and decisions about making the framework mandatory will be made thereafter.

Summary of evidence related to a career pathway and a learning strategy for social workers

Social workers are involved in a wide variety of post-qualifying learning activity, motivated by both personal and professional circumstances that go well beyond minimum registration requirements. They are discouraged by lack of support and recognition, competing pressures and financial considerations.

Strong policy and financial drivers are changing the nature of the social work role and have undermined the professional identity. Professional relationships are being re-negotiated and there is significant potential for utilising well-rehearsed negotiating and conciliation skills in order to regain a strong professional identity and status, particularly in integrated teams.

Work-based learning will be best supported by a positive learning culture which can encourage research mindedness and leadership attributes at all levels of the organisation.

Experience in the rest of the UK suggests some success in establishing professional awards frameworks while career pathways have been more difficult to promote.

Recommendations related to career progression and a learning strategy

There is a need for robust intelligence about career patterns for social workers in Scotland. Without this information, and any sense of commonality across Scotland, it is difficult to envisage a career pathway. However, a professional awards framework can be achieved as a preliminary step.

There is need for a systematic review of existing post-qualifying activity, the facilitators and barriers and the extent to which this activity affects career progression.

Beyond the probationary period and congruent to it, a national awards framework for social workers should be established to provide clarity around roles and responsibilities and to stimulate career progression by bringing national recognition across existing different organisational and hierarchical arrangements.

Flexible pathways to gaining credit towards these awards should be established drawing on best practice in supporting workplace and blended learning, embedding work-based learning with a professional development framework. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) remains robust.

The role of the learning supervisor/manager should be formalised and recognised in line with career progression opportunities.

Consideration should be given to promoting and supporting a positive learning culture and a research culture with employers in order to mainstream research mindedness and expectations around post-qualifying learning.

Consideration should be given to the wide range of informal learning approaches which are often cost effective and could usefully augment, if not replace, more expensive, formal options.

Consideration should be given to establishing a national research strategy for social work built on partnerships between employers and HEIs with agreement about research priorities.

Post registration training and learning (PRTL) requirements for social workers should be reviewed in relation to the frequency, quantity and quality of evidence required, particularly in relation to any new awards framework. Additionally, the funding mechanism should become more commensurate with other current professional memberships.

Possible implications arising from these recommendations (see also section above on possible implications for a probationary period)

Creation of a set of standards underpinning a professional awards framework and a core curriculum should be agreed through a partnership of employers, academics and SSSC.

Consideration will be required about any role of SSSC in the approval, monitoring and reviewing of any approved courses leading to, or underpinning, the agreed standard for successful completion.

The task of creating and promoting an awards framework will be time consuming and require a highly effective collaborative approach from all stakeholders.

Lessons can be learned from an earlier post-qualifying framework where awards were unpopular and difficult to complete. Additionally, successful candidates did not feel rewarded for their efforts

Employers will have concerns about set up costs, and the ongoing resource costs of supporting a burgeoning awards programme. It will require a cultural change which embraces vibrant learning as routine.

The current continuum of learning for social workers represents a clear division between HEIs being responsible for the undergraduate process, with employers

taking the principal role in promoting and supporting post-qualifying activities. This break in continuity needs to become more permeable.

There seems scope for consideration of how post-qualifying activity might be funded including a loan system from employers; part funding by employers; sabbaticals.

There may be a significant role for the SSSC in establishing, promoting and maintaining a learning culture in the workplace. Culture change is notoriously slow and difficult.

An awards framework should not inhibit progression into the profession from other parts of the workforce, rather should encourage wider participation and facilitate wider entry.

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